

ROBERT AND THE MAXIMÓN

Zacc Dukowitz

Everything smelled new in Xela. The burnt wood and the rain and the cheap gasoline, the sweet bread baking in the *panaderías* in the early morning and the wet cobblestones in the afternoon, all of it almost familiar, almost like home, but then twisting just so on the wind to reveal itself as altogether different. Robert was sure it had something to do with the mountains, the strange green mountains that appeared at the edge of the city like a dream, peaks hidden by white skeins of mist throughout the drizzly afternoons until bursting suddenly into sight above the low grey buildings at sunset, just in time for the fading light to outline the fullness of their hulking shapes, their sharp edges sinister, green crags violent, like some promise heard whispered in a nursery, terrible voice of a wicked crone, about the certainty of all life ending in death.

But then in the mornings a soft shade. A green like backyards and soccer games back home in Santa Fe, pullulating with new life and so different from

the ominous colors at dusk that the peaks themselves seemed remade by the sun's rising.

Looking at up those green peaks as the sun set, Robert could imagine drums sounding from their high reaches. A chant curling its way down to the cobbled streets where cars sped by at dangerously high speeds, the incantations of the mountains working through the narrow corridors of the city and as if by magic transforming everything he'd ever smelled, everything he'd ever seen or touched or heard, so that he no longer knew himself or his place in the world.

Dog shit, for instance, smelled stronger here, and this could not solely be explained by its omnipresence. During the day wild dogs roamed the streets in small, skittish groups with their tails between their legs, eating bits of rotten meat, old fruit, and bread crusts from the gutters. But at night they became bold. Robert had once had to run from three of them, mangy, skinny little things that would have fled in the daylight, but bared their teeth and snapped at him as he walked alone in the darkness, pursuing him for two blocks before stopping to bark loudly into the night as he ran away in shame, hoping no one had seen.

It was 2011 and Robert was sixteen years old. He'd been sent to Guatemala a month before, having never left the U.S. in his life, without any instructions or information except that he must go. His mother had woken him one summer morning and told him his bags were packed. He was leaving that afternoon.

To be plucked from summer break and dropped into such an unknown world had made him feel sad, desperate, but also at times as if he were having the greatest adventure in the world. Because what would his friends in Santa Fe be doing with their days? Smoking pot, swimming in the pools at their rich parents' homes, walking around the plaza trying to meet girls. And here he was, with the green mountains above him and danger lurking around every corner.

But the worry and sadness was also about his mother, for he had no idea what kind of trouble would make her send him off, and so hastily, to a place she'd always claimed to hate. Robert spoke only a little Spanish, and he understood none of the Mayan dialects, so he had no idea what was being said, which only made him feel more alone and more confused—more uncertain—about what was happening all around him.

Yet he was no coward. For him it was a point of pride to go ahead to his uncle's store in the early morning or walk home alone late in the afternoon, as the sun was beginning to set. He'd beg off his uncle's company by saying he wanted to work more, to get to work early or leave late, then use the time to meander through the tight avenues near the plaza downtown. He liked to frighten himself by walking in the shadows and refusing to step off the high sidewalks when packs of young men came toward him in menacing clumps. He stood his ground, even smiled at them, but shied away when they smiled back warmly and tried to engage him.

Robert's mother had warned him for years about the depredations of Guatemala. The dangers of Central and South America went along with the stories of his deadbeat father, the shiftless dreamer, the worthless hippie who'd left her—left them, in her constant telling—when Robert was six years old, after a long journey that had begun on Lake Atitlan and ended somewhere in the Amazon.

"I've only come back for a short time," his father had said to her, when he came back to collect his things.

“A short time,” his mother liked to repeat when she told the story, snorting loudly at the words. “A short time. Who on God’s green Earth actually says things like that, a short time?”

Robert’s father had seen something in the jungle, he went on to say. It was after a German killed one of the *botos* with his knife, a baby that swam up beside their canoe, trying to play or beg food. The German drew a long blade swiftly from his belt, stabbed it deep into the water, right into the dolphin’s skull, and the water swirled red—that image always came back to Robert, translated and embellished as it must have been by his mother’s retelling, for she was a great storyteller—swirled red and dark and Robert’s father, who hadn’t yet heard about the great river’s dolphins, how they fit into the cosmology of those who lived with the swelling and dissipation of the water, who didn’t yet know what a terrible, unholy thing this killing would be to those people, knew something had happened that would change his life.

That was how he put it. “I just knew right then,” he said. “I could tell right away that things were going to be different. *Everything* was going to be different.”

Standing there in the adobe-walled kitchen in Santa Fe but somewhere else, his eyes lost in the murky green of the jungle. And he was right because

that night something came walking out of the vast overgrowth, out of the dark green shadows of the woods. It held his face with its big, pink hand, stroked his bearded cheek, and now he could never live here in America again. Couldn't have a job or drive a car or be a father or husband at all because he'd been touched by the *encantado's* pink hand, had been seduced for all his life, and now he knew he was meant to do something special. Something different.

"*Botos* my ass." Robert's mother snorted. "He was high. He told me. They call them shamans down there, but if you ask me it's no different from what we used to do out in the Jemez. Whether you put it on your tongue or crush it up with a mortar and pestle, it's all the same shit. Just getting high, watching the clouds go by."

Then she'd wrap her arms around herself as if suddenly cold. And Robert knew that now was the time to hold her. His mother, who was so slight, and who despite all the yelling and upset loved him fiercely, would do anything for him, would protect him and warn him against all the world's depredations, all of the strange and dangerous things out there which took many guises but could be known simply by the one word *other*. He knew it was time for him to hold her, that she needed that, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. And so he stood there in the cold light of the kitchen in Santa Fe, with the soft

green Sangre de Cristos outside the window, stood in the same spot where his father had said those cool words eight, nine, now ten years before and watched the tears slowly wet his mother's cheeks. Watched her shake from holding it in, the pain at being abandoned these ten long years, the pain of all the accumulated slights and injuries that gather as the years pass, moss onto a stone, layering upon a life lived beyond its imagined prime.

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So Robert's fear of the locals, of the mountains and the smells, of everything new here in this strange country did have an explanation, however convoluted it might have been. He even felt an aversion to his uncle, his mother's brother, who had been the one to draw his father to Lake Atitlan on that trip that never ended ten years before. His uncle had figured too in his mother's storytelling but more often as a coda, a place where she trailed off before the crying began. He was lost to this country. He was lost to her, she seemed to be saying, though she would never finish the thought.

But Uncle Henry, when he noticed Robert shying away from the local men who worked for him, called Robert's aversion something else.

"You're racist," he said. "It's ridiculous. They're just brown, that's all."

Uncle Henry was seated at a workbench in the back of the fix-it store he owned, his glasses pushed down the bridge of his nose. He wore a long, scraggly beard that looked as if it had never been trimmed. Lone hairs stuck crazily from the beard's main body like a plant's green tendrils seeking sun, each one lit in high relief by the light streaming through a window on the cinderblock wall behind him.

He was at once a huge and nimble man, who just now had taken up a tiny screwdriver with his large hand, applying the tool with surgical precision to the back of a cheap plastic clock. He turned from the clock to peer at Robert.

"You never saw a brown person in New Mexico?" he said. "Just didn't have 'em there? Give me a break." He snorted.

Robert could hear his mother in the snort, and the recognition triggered a twinge in his stomach, something for which he hadn't been prepared.

"It's just, when you grow up hearing about a place, it's hard to change your mind," Robert said, pushing away that feeling.

He picked up a remote control and pointed it at a television sitting abandoned in the corner. He pushed the buttons on the control, one at a time, working his way through each one. Nothing happened.

“Give me that.” The remote was swallowed by his uncle’s huge hand, placed onto a nearby table.

“Maybe during the war,” said Uncle Henry, returning to his subject. “Maybe back then you’d have a reason to be scared. But even then you wouldn’t, because they weren’t going after gringos. That would be too high profile. It was always the indigenous who had to worry, and maybe the Guatemaltecos, if they were associating with the indigenous, with those who were speaking out.” He paused, screwdriver held aloft.

“You know, I moved here when they were still picking people up on the street. They’d pick them up, and you’d never see them again. Can you imagine?”

Robert shook his head.

“It was never someone I knew, always friends of friends—people involved in demonstrating, in speaking out. Some of them were just looking for their missing brother, missing son. And others, they were only distributing flyers, just talking out about what was going on up in the mountains. The raids on pueblos, soldiers killing women, children, anyone they could to stop some guerrilla phantasm that usually wasn’t anywhere around. Just an excuse to help private interests move Indians off their land, really.”

He squinted down at a tiny wire, took it from inside the plastic clock, like a strand of black hair pinched between his thick fingers.

“But to say you’re afraid now,” he continued, glancing up, “I mean, just walk around. Everyone smiles at you, right?”

“Right.”

“So there you go. I know that in the U.S. if someone smiles at you, you might think, Now why’d they do that? Are they trying to hide something? But here it’s just because they’re smiling at you.” He looked up and smiled himself, the white of his teeth emerging from his thick beard. “It’s a ‘what you see is what you get’ kind of thing here.”

Uncle Henry set the clock down, reached out and covered Robert’s hand with his own, forcing Robert to look him in the eyes.

“I mean, why do you think I moved here, Robert? Why do you think I left everything I knew and came to live in such a faraway place?”

Why did you? Robert wanted to ask, but something stopped him. He didn’t want to know the answer. He didn’t want his uncle to become any stranger, any more distant from feelings of home than he already was.

Robert took his hand back and picked up the remote, pointed it again at the T.V. His uncle swiped it away, dropping it into an oversized pocket on the

bottom half of his shirt that looked like a kangaroo pouch—this a creation he'd made for the fix-it work, a large flap of material sown on with a triple stitch so he'd always have a ready place to store things as he tinkered.

"If you want to be useful," Uncle Henry said, turning his attention back to the clock, "you can go out there and see if Catarino needs a hand with that DVD player. Then we can put a movie on in the display and get people's attention as they walk by on the street."

Robert found Catarino on his knees in front of the small black box, a ball cap turned backward on his head. The machine was lit up, the clock flashing 12:00—which was more than could be said when the player had been purchased as junk a few days before—but Robert was distracted from the progress Catarino had made by thinking that he could never tell how old these people were. Catarino, who had a quick smile and an unusually round face, could have been seventeen or thirty, and neither number would have surprised Robert.

Catarino looked up and smiled. He asked Robert something in Spanish, and Robert shrugged.

"No entiendo," Robert said. He pointed at the DVD player. "Como está?"

Catarino held up a thick bundle of wires, said something quickly in Spanish, then went back to work. Robert noticed the rosary wrapped around Catarino's dark wrist and remembered seeing him on the street after church a week back. He'd worn a white collared shirt, leather wingtips, pressed slacks, his black hair slicked back on his head and his hands clasped before him in a serious, adult manner. But he'd also seen the figure of the Maximón at Catarino's house once, and it seemed strange, another confusing thing about this place, that Catarino could worship both Jesus Christ and this other, darker god—a god who had many origin stories, who represented The Adversary, the darkness in all of us, and who, some said, was an avatar of Jesus' betrayer, Judas Iscariot.

The Maximón (the *x* pronounced as a *sh* sound, Mashimon, as in Xela as well) was a local deity, a drinking, whoring god who demanded sacrifices—of tobacco, of *mota*, of loud music and sex. Robert knew all of this, but he wasn't sure how he'd gotten the information. It was funny how things seemed to percolate into your mind here, as if from the streets of the city itself, from the mountains, until you were aware of their truth but couldn't say why or how you'd learned them.

Robert had been standing in Catarino's hallway that night, broken electronics in his arms, while a beautiful dark-haired woman with a pleasingly angular face—Catarino's wife? his daughter?—went to fetch him. The flickering light of candles behind a nearby door caught Robert's attention. He set the electronics down on the floor and walked over, pushed the door open a crack, leaning his head into the gloom. He flinched back—there was a man in there!

Robert froze with his head half inside the doorway. The man was slouched against the far wall as if drunk, a hat pushed down on his face. Beer and wine bottles littered the floor around him, interspersed with guttering votives, thin ones and fat ones, all kinds of burning candles. Some had been affixed to plates with their drippings but many had simply been shoved into the bottles and were slowly oozing white wax down the brown and green glass.

This was no man, Robert realized as he stared at the figure. He was too still. And there were too many things before him, so much that Robert began to understand the candlelit arrangement to be a kind of shrine. The figure was perched on something, a low wooden platform, so that he seemed taller, bigger than a normal man. Robert stepped quietly into the room, moving toward the thing. He must know what it was—something compelled him to understand.

Robert lifted the wide-brimmed hat. He saw crazy painted eyes beneath, barely visible in the gloom. He pushed the hat up farther, leaning in—

The sound of footsteps came clomping noisily down the stairs behind him, accompanied by voices. Robert slipped out of the room, returned to waiting patiently just inside the front door. As Robert looked at Catarino's rosary now, watching the man work on the DVD player, he couldn't help but picture the figure in that shadowy room filled with flickering candlelight.

But the city itself was like this, leading a double life with its two names—Xela to the Mayans and Quetzaltenango to the Guatemaltecos. His uncle had tried to explain that the other name wasn't a Spanish word, but came from a different group of indigenous, who had been helping the Spanish when—but Robert's attention always wandered around this part of the story.

Robert liked to keep the separation simple. One city with two names. Mayan and Spanish at odds. The first name exotic, reminding him of that poem his mother loved about Kubla Kahn and the great dome of pleasure. He liked to imagine that fabulous land with its vast gardens and subterranean river being pronounced in the Mayan way, Shanadu. His mother would like that.

And then the other, harsher name, Quetzaltenango, which had a bureaucratic ring—the kind of name a government would provide—and which reminded him of New Mexico for some reason. Something about conquest, about the conquistadors.

Quetzaltenango was the green mountains in the morning, when the smells wafted to him on the walk to his uncle's store. Something almost known, almost familiar. While Xela was a name of mystery, of drums played darkly in the night, a name for the green mountains revealed at dusk, serrated peaks just visible in the gloom, standing as clear warning to the known world that a border defined it and woe betide those who stepped beyond its limit.

But wasn't he like this too?

For there were parts of himself he felt he knew, and then parts that were dark—parts that frightened him by how foreign and unfamiliar they seemed.

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Robert asked his uncle if he could take an early lunch and left Catarino to work on the DVD player. He stopped to buy tacos at a street vendor, whose cart stood at the edge of the vast warren of stalls that made up the town's main market, then made his way down *Calle 5* with the small packet dripping in his hand until arriving at the *parque central*. He walked directly to the concrete

circle in the middle of the park that stood like a huge, grey halo, held aloft by Corinthian columns, and sat beneath it on a stone bench.

The monument served no practical purpose—it was just a ring of concrete suspended in the air, with nothing in the middle, providing no shelter—and Robert had from the first admired how flagrantly aesthetic the structure was. Against the mountains in the background the circle seemed to defy the very existence of wilderness, a manmade thing put there to demonstrate the possibility of such making, the power of human thinking and doing to tame what was wild.

He'd seen a picture of the concrete circle online the morning his mother told him he had to leave, and that memory of sitting in his bedroom in Santa Fe with the laptop open—*You can't take that*, she'd said, *They'll steal it from you, cut you for it*. She was wild, insistent—that memory of being in his bedroom while looking at a picture of this odd, semi-Grecian structure was comforting, because it reminded him of his mother, and of his home.

She'd woken him early on a Saturday, an hour after sunrise, and told him simply that she'd bought a plane ticket. He was leaving that afternoon. She opened her mouth to explain, but couldn't seem to find the words. It was too

much, somehow. He was to take the train to Albuquerque, she said, then take the plane, and his uncle would meet him in Guatemala City late that night.

It was all written down, she said, and shoved a piece of paper in his hand. She would not say why, no matter how many times he asked.

Though his friends stayed out overnight all the time, his mother had never let him travel very far alone, had only ever allowed him to make one weekend outing, and though he'd felt smothered by her for years, it was unsettling—terrifying, really—to see her suddenly change like this, suddenly push him out into the world. It was like waking one morning to find the sun had risen at a wildly different place than usual, the whole world strange and off-kilter.

Why, not two mornings before she'd worried about him sneaking into the Santa Fe reservoir to swim, not because it was illegal, but because she still believed he was afraid of swimming, and thought he was just trying to show off for his friends—though he knew that some of this was his fault because, as frustrated as he was by her hovering, he still hadn't the heart to tell her that he loved to swim now, loved lots of things that used to scare him as a boy.

And now she was sending him alone on an airplane into the heart of Central America, the very place she'd always warned him about, always described as responsible for stealing his father. What was he to think?

Robert sat eating his tacos, staring up at the concrete circle as cars sped by, honking loudly on the street encircling the park. A man in a worn green beret stood in front of the bank across the street with a carbine in his hands, eyes fixed stonily on the space before him. Another stood in front of an ATM on the corner. Unlike other locals these men would not smile at you or say hello, and they were so short that you felt their guns were always passively pointed at your head, another aspect of the danger felt living in this place.

Robert stood up from the bench where he'd been eating, wiping his hands on his pants. He turned toward the old church at the far end of the plaza, thinking he might walk through the stands filled with fresh fruit and candy scattered in front of the building.

As he began to walk toward the church he saw the woman with dark hair who'd gone to get Catarino the night he saw the Maximón. She was walking toward him wearing a backpack, even more beautiful in the daylight than she had been in the dimness of the hallway.

He didn't want to talk to her. He could picture how flustered he'd be, stuttering stupidly with his childish Spanish while her dark eyes laughed at him. He changed his course, turning suddenly away toward the busy street to avoid meeting her.

When he stepped down from the curb something caught his foot and he tripped forward, thinking as he began to fall only of whether she was watching, not noticing the car speeding toward him as he put out his hands to catch himself. Someone grabbed the back of his shirt, tugged him out of the street, and he fell back on the sidewalk.

He looked up and saw that she was standing over him.

“You’re strong,” he said, blinking at her.

She laughed, a braying sound that seemed at odds with her beauty.

“It wasn’t me,” she said in English, holding a hand over her mouth and continuing to make the deep, cough-like laugh. He looked around, confused, and noticed a short man in a wide-brimmed hat standing a little behind her, his brow folded in concern.

“Está bien?” the man asked. “OK?” he said in English, nodding his head rapidly.

“Sí, sí, está bien,” Robert said, pushing himself up. The man looked Robert over then nodded once more, and walked off.

“Are you sure you’re OK?” she asked once he was standing.

“Yeah, I’m fine. But you—you speak English?”

She nodded, laughing again. "I was in school in the U.S. for the last two years. In Omaha." She jerked her thumb at the backpack. "I'm still studying. Come on," she said, taking off toward the stalls of candy and food on other side of the plaza. "I want to get a snack."

Robert followed her as she bought packets of sugary candy, a plastic bag of lychees, and a bottle of soda. She led him back to a bench near the concrete circle.

"So," she said, offering him a lychee. "What's wrong?"

He took it, eyeing the yellow hairs sprouting from the red ball. They looked sharp but felt soft. "What do you mean, what's wrong?"

"You always look so sad. Here," she said, and took the lychee from him. She stripped a piece of the hairy skin off, revealing the pale white fruit beneath.

"Try it," she said, noticing his hesitation. "It's good."

He raised the fruit to his lips, and bit in. It was delicious—sweet, and with enough firmness to please the teeth. He picked off more of the skin, then remembered what she'd said.

"I do?" he said. "Look sad, I mean? I didn't know that."

“Most people peel the whole thing, and then eat it.” She shrugged, laughing, and he could see that her laughter was part of how she faced the world. “And yes, you do look sad,” she said. “I see you here almost every day, eating lunch alone. Like you’re in your own world. What happened? Did someone die?”

“No. No one died. I just—”

“You miss someone? Is that what it is?”

“Exactly.

“Someone back in the U.S.?”

“Uh huh. You know, it’s hard, with that distance.” He paused. “At least, I think they’re in the U.S. But really, I’m not sure where she is right now.”

“I know what that’s like,” the girl said, and she looked away at the street.

She stood up a moment later, wiping her hands together over the pavement to get the sugar off. “Come on,” she said. “I know what we can do.” She started walking away.

“But where are we going?”

“To the *campo santo*.”

She didn’t bother to look over her shoulder this time. She knew he was coming.

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They walked in silence for the first several blocks. While waiting to cross a busy street she turned and said, “I’m Magdalena, by the way.”

“Oh, right.” Robert held up his hand and did a small wave, then blushed. “I’m— my name is Rob. Robert. Either one. Whatever you want.”

“Which one do you like?”

“Whichever. I don’t care.”

“OK,” she said, and walked ahead into the street, weaving through traffic, leaving Robert to rush after her.

As they approached the long walls of the town’s sprawling cemetery tombs appeared like houses, rising above them on the hillside. Robert was mystified, for he’d driven by the place once and thought it a slum, some kind of small, separate neighborhood. Now that he could see the structures closer it was clear they were not made to be lived in, though many of them were huge, narrow in width but two and three stories tall, and there were so many stretched out over such a large area that it was hard to believe no one lived there—that such a large part of the city had been devoted to the dead.

They walked through the gates of the cemetery. Magdalena trotted ahead down a cobblestone avenue as wide as a city street, passing row upon row of

the small houses for the dead. Some were freshly painted, bright pink and green and teal, while others had fallen into disrepair, the concrete cracked and chipped, the paint faded and worn like old clothes. Some were built in layers, like the stories of a house—and here Robert understood that each story was devoted to its own body—while others were of a single piece, tall and wide.

The dead were not forgotten here. The flowers and notes scribbled on scraps of paper that lay about the tombs were fresh, the pinwheels on the graves of children were recently placed. Some of the small structures boasted their own front yards, small plots of grass green and thriving, clearly tended to with care.

Magdalena stopped at a statue of a woman. She was laid out horizontally on a long stone bier, in front of a modest gray tomb of only one level. Flowers, letters, candles, and small statuary littered the statue and the surrounding area. A rosary had been draped across the statue's neck, dark red beads dangling into the black earth.

"Here," Magdalena said, taking a notebook out of her backpack. "Write a note to her, whoever she is, then leave it here. And that means you'll see her again. That you'll be re-re—what's the word?

"Reunited?"

“Exactly!” She beamed, handing him the notebook.

Robert sat down cross-legged in the dirt, holding it in front of him. He stuck the pen Magdalena had given him in his mouth, then quickly pulled it out when he saw her looking down at him.

“Why are you thinking so much?” she said. “Just write how much you love her, and miss her, and how you’re going to marry her when you see her. Write something *romantic*. You know?”

“Romantic? Wait—what—do you think this is about someone I’m, someone I’m *dating* or something?”

“Of course. Who else would it be?”

“No, it’s my—” but he was embarrassed to tell her now.

“Who?” She sat down next to him. “Who do you miss?”

“It’s about my mom,” he said quietly, digging her pen into the dirt beside him. “It’s about missing my mom.”

“What!” She laughed, a tinkling, silvery sound altogether different from her hoarse braying laugh on the plaza. “But why didn’t you say anything earlier?”

“I don’t know. You just started walking without asking me anything, so I figured you knew what I was talking about.”

Magdalena shook her head.

“You can’t really ask Vanushka for help with finding your mom. Though I’m sorry you don’t know where she is.”

“Yeah,” Robert said. “Me too.”

He handed her the notebook and pen, which she wiped on her dark blue skirt and returned to her backpack.

“What about—” Robert said, “well, what about—maybe I could write a note to the Maximón. To the one at your house.”

Magdalena shook her head, narrowing her eyes. “Oh no,” she said. “You should never ask him for help.”

“Why not?”

“Because he breaks things. He’s evil.”

“What? But why would you keep something like that where you live?”

She stood up, shaking her head like this was a silly question.

“To remind us of the good,” she said, taking off toward the cemetery gate, her new airy laugh trailing behind her like a bright summer dress.

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Robert didn’t make it back to the fix-it store until almost four o’clock. When he walked in he found his uncle pacing back and forth, an unlit cigarillo

clinched between his teeth. Uncle Henry took the cigarillo out and pointed it at Robert.

“Where have you been!”

The end of the cigarillo had been gnawed to a nub. “I was worried,” his uncle said, running a hand through his thick beard. “You were gone for—for hours.”

“I’m sorry. I lost track of time.” Robert was tempted to tell him about Magdalena, about the statue and everything that had happened, but decided he wanted to keep it to himself. It made it seem more real, more special somehow, to keep the afternoon a secret.

Uncle Henry put the cigarillo back in his mouth and looked away. “I’ve had news from your mother.”

“Really? But what did she say? Is everything—is she alright?”

“We have to go,” his uncle said. “I’ll tell you about it in the truck.” He looked him up and down. “You’ll have to wear what you have on, I guess.”

They walked hurriedly to the garage where his uncle kept his old Toyota pickup, Robert anxious to ask what was going on but also afraid to do so. He’d never been superstitious, but now he found himself wondering if visiting the statue, if even mentioning the Maximón, had in fact produced some kind of

effect. It was no longer clear how things were connected—what action might produce what result, and how all of it was related.

Uncle Henry maneuvered through the traffic downtown, around the plaza with the grey concrete halo, and soon they were on the main road heading out of Xela.

“Where are we going?” Robert ventured to ask as they left the last outskirts of the city.

“To Lake Atitlan,” his uncle said, looking out the window distractedly. “To Santiago. We should be there in a few hours.”

“But—”

“We’re going to meet your mother.”

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Though Robert had heard much about the lake, seen pictures of it online and in his uncle’s house, he’d never been there. The sun was just starting to set as they turned the corners on a steep mountain road and began to descend toward the lake. Robert could see slivers of the lake’s vast, turbid surface in the distance below.

The town of Santiago was huge but much smaller than Xela, the buildings tightly packed into a triangulation of volcanoes, two of them on one side and

one on the other, overlooking a bay that was like a second, smaller lake, with the larger body of Lake Atitlan off in the distance.

They drove slowly through the cobblestone streets, stopping finally at a small *tienda* whose walls were naked cinderblock and whose roof was constructed with overlapping sheets of corrugated tin. Uncle Henry put the truck in park and got out without speaking.

“Well?” he said, walking around and pulling Robert’s door open. “Are you coming?”

Robert jumped down onto the sidewalk. “Sorry. I didn’t know if this was the final—”

“It is,” Uncle Henry said, stalking off ahead.

“But—is she here? Is this where she is?”

Uncle Henry either chose to ignore him or didn’t hear, and Robert hustled to catch up as his uncle walked quickly down a side street, then through the open front door of someone’s home. The smell of incense hit his nostrils as he stepped into the dim foyer. Rock music could be heard playing from a farther room.

A woman whose head was wrapped in a shawl emerged from the dark hallway, holding out her white hands. "Robert," she murmured, putting her hands on his face. "Come here."

"Mom?" Robert put his face on her shoulder, wrapped his arms around her. "What are you—"

"Shh," she said, rocking him in her arms.

As she held him something burst open inside of Robert, all of the strength he'd gathered about him this last month. He buried his nose in the shawl wrapped around her neck and exhaled loudly.

After a moment she pushed him gently away and took his hand, nodding down the hall toward where the music was playing. They walked in that direction, the music getting louder, until entering a room where a large doll stood propped up on a stage. It was surrounded by candles and beer bottles, children's toys, scraps of paper and pieces of stale food on paper plates stained with grease. Flowers lay strewn here and there in no apparent order.

The doll's eyes were small and black. It had no arms.

"This is where it started," his mother whispered.

She walked toward the Maximón.

"Where what started?"

“You don’t have to be so quiet,” Uncle Henry said, stepping into the room.

“You know that right?”

“I know,” his mother said, glaring over her shoulder. “I’ve been here before.”

“You have?” Robert said, but his mother didn’t offer any more information. “But—why are we here?” Robert said. “I thought he was bad.” He pointed at the doll, looking first at his uncle, then back at his mother. “I thought he was evil.”

“No,” Uncle Henry said, walking up behind them. “I mean, people do say that. But he’s a lot of things. Some people say the Mayans compared him to Christ, since early Spanish missionaries talked about how Jesus was all cut up and suffered for us, and then was resurrected, which is the same as him. Some people say he was a trickster, the first labor organizer, basically, who rallied all the Indians against the missionaries. Even when they cut him up and left him for dead, he’d come back to life, come back to fight for justice.

“And then there’s another story, and I’m told this one is a little more legitimate because you can find it in sacred writings, that he’s related to the Mayan god Mam, who was created to protect the first women of the Maya so no one would sleep with them. But then he started sleeping with them himself.

So they cut him up, and then he finally started doing his job right.” Uncle Henry pointed at the Maximón. “That’s why he doesn’t have any arms, according to that story.”

“But so, is he good or is he bad?”

Uncle Henry laughed, his beard bouncing around his face. “I don’t know,” he said. “Is life good or bad? Are people?”

Robert’s mother had been ignoring this exchange, keeping her eyes on the figure in the center of the dais and moving her lips without producing sound, as if praying. She now reached in her handbag and took out a pack of cigarettes and a small bottle of Quetzalteka—that cheap, clear aguardiente you could find in any local store—and placed them carefully on the low wooden dais beside a number of other offerings. Then she stepped back.

She gave the doll a last look, dipped her head as if saying farewell, then turned away and left without speaking. Robert stayed for a moment longer, looking into the doll’s black eyes, then he followed her outside, leaving his uncle alone in the room.

§

It was already dark by the time they were through with the Maximón, so they found a hostel where they could spend the night, Uncle Henry deciding

to stay on as well rather than make the return drive in the dark. Before going to dinner Robert's mother pulled him aside and asked him to walk with her down to the lake.

There were no streetlights, and they had to use the dim light of their cell-phones to see where they were going. They came to the main docks where the *lanchas*, their roofs blue, their bodies painted a white that glowed in the moon-lit darkness, were rocked gently by the lapping wavelets which moved constantly toward them across the lake. His mother turned left, following a foot-path along the water, and Robert followed her.

"I know you want to know what's going on," she said, the first words she'd spoken since they left the hostel. "And I'm going to tell you in just a second. I'm going to explain everything."

They paused, trying to locate the sound of a motor that was moving away from them across the water.

"There," his mother said, pointing at a light in the distance, almost out of sight.

She stopped a moment later at a tree whose limbs hung out over the water. "Here it is," she said. "The lake has risen so much—I wasn't sure if it would still be here."

“But Mom,” Robert said as he sat down beside her. “You know this place. Why didn’t you ever tell me that you’d been here before? That you’d been to Guatemala? All these years I thought—”

“I don’t know.” She sighed. “Because it was painful to think about. Because, after what happened with your father, I didn’t want to remember.”

She looked out over the water.

“We met here,” she said.

“What? *This* is where you met? What about all those stories you told me? What about Madrid? What about the coffee shop and his guitar and all of that?”

“Well all of that was true too, in a way. I mean, he did use to play guitar out in Madrid, and then we’d drive the back way to Albuquerque, drive around all night back there, out to the Jemez, all around. But no, the first time I saw him was right on that street we just walked down.”

“You’re a liar. You’ve been lying to me my whole life.”

“Please. Just. Just listen—I’m trying to tell you. I’m trying to explain. Your father, when I first saw him, he was carrying this huge backpack down the street, just another gringo traveling through Central America—just like I was,

I guess—and I offered him some water. We decided to walk down to the lake together, and he sat down with me right here. Under this tree.”

Robert stared hard at her, as if he might see her transform before his eyes. He tried to imagine her here in Guatemala, alone and much younger, tried to picture who she had been then. To be traveling alone in Central America, to be another wandering youth, just how she'd always described his father. He saw a young woman with much longer hair, braids of yellow and green. Her white teeth flashed as she opened her mouth to laugh. She had big silver bracelets that jangled in the sun. She was beautiful.

It made him feel uneasy, to look at his mother and imagine this other person.

She patted his hand, bringing him back to the present. She did her best to smile at him, then took off the bag she'd been carrying on her shoulder and set it between them. Her small white hands reached inside, emerged holding an old cracker tin. There was a large dent in the top and the label had been worn almost completely away, but you could still make out the arabesqued R and a few of the washed out blues and reds.

“This is all that's left of him,” she said.

“All that's left of who?”

"I'm sorry," she said. She stifled a sob. "I'm so sorry."

She began to cry, holding the container against her chest. "I just wanted to see him again. He called me, and I wanted to be with him. I just wanted to see him, before he—"

She stood up suddenly, opened the tin, and tilted it over the water. Something fell quietly from it. Ashes—he could see them. Fell silently down, disappearing into the night before ever hitting the inky water.

Robert knew what he was seeing, knew what this had to mean, but still couldn't understand.

"Here," his mother said, handing him the container. "You should do the rest."

Robert took it.

"This is my . . . are you saying he—that he's dead now?"

She nodded, turning away and hiding her face in her hands.

Robert looked down at the inside of the cracker tin, trying to make out its contents, but he couldn't see anything. He put his hand inside of it and touched the ashes. They were soft. They felt like nothing. Like air.

His hands were shaking. Flakes of ash blew up out of the tin and into the wind.

“Let me,” she said, reaching for the tin. It seemed she was worried it would spill, that the ashes would blow away without it meaning anything.

“No,” Robert said. “Give me the lid.” Without waiting he pushed past her, picked the lid up from where she’d tossed it hastily to the ground. He put it on, pressing it down tightly around the circumference of the tin.

“This is mine,” he said fiercely.

“Robert, honey. You can’t. He asked me. It was his final wish.”

“I don’t care. What about what I wanted? What about *me*?”

She reached for the container and he swung it away from her, too hard. It flew from his hands, making a soft splash in the water below them.

“Oh—” she said, looking into the darkness. In a moment it appeared bobbing on the surface of the water, a flicker of light from across the bay glinting off its metallic surface.

Robert stepped away from her. He pulled his shirt off, his pants, stripping down quickly to his boxer shorts. He looked at her but she could not see his eyes. And then he dove into the water.

“Robert!” she called, standing at the edge of the lake. “Where are you?”

He surfaced near the bank, treading water easily. “I’m right here,” he said. “I’m just going to find that thing.” She could hear him splashing away in the darkness.

Robert found the tin quickly. But the water was cold, invigorating. It made him feel alive. And there was something compelling about the open black space beneath him—he wanted to see what was down there. He let the tin float on the surface, watching it bounce for a moment on the tiny waves to make sure it would not sink. Then he turned and dove.

His heart pounded as he opened his eyes under the water. Below him all was darkness. He could hear his mother’s voice above him growing fainter. He kicked his legs, his hands held out in front of him, his eyes all but blind. Propelling himself down so that the darkness engulfed him, swallowed him up until he hardly had a name, hardly had a body, just a center of exhilaration diving into the night.

Zacc Dukowitz holds an MFA in fiction from the University of Florida, and his writing has appeared in the *Bellevue Literary Review*, *American Literary Review*, *PANK*, and elsewhere. He wrote dialogue for and played the lead in the independent film *I Am Death*, and he currently lives in rural Guatemala with his wife and two dogs, Scout and Boo Radley.